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Nguyen, Bang, Melewar, T. C., Japtura, Arnold, Han, Sung Ho, Chen, Cheng-Hao Steve and Yu, Xiaoyu (2018) An investigation of the corporate identity construct in China: managerial evidence from the high technology industry. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 24 (8) . pp. 779-800. ISSN 1352-7266 [Article] (doi:10.1080/13527266.2016.1143382)

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# **An investigation of the corporate identity construct in China: managerial evidence from the high technology industry**

## **Abstract**

The study develops and extends existing frameworks of corporate identity and investigates what organisations in China perceive as essential components of the corporate identity concept including their dimensions and contents. The study adopted a qualitative approach and the method of research was a case study. Using the soft-laddering approach, and a multidisciplinary categorisation of analyses of corporate literature and web sites, a systematic analysis of the corporate identity was carried out. Different from previous studies, the study reveals new dimensions on the basis of the industry practitioners' views. The context of China has shown to influence a different focus, more significantly around the 'impression' that corporate identity can contribute with commercially. It is suggested that new high-tech firms in China may not have enough experience and capacity to engage in a more holistic corporate identity concept provided. The lack of such experience is particularly likely for new firms, which are still in their early stage of development. Implications for management of corporate identity in China are presented along with directions for further research in the marketing communications literature.

**Keywords** – Corporate identity, corporate communication, corporate strategy, organisational identity, corporate image, China.

## Introduction

Marketing communication directed towards the external stakeholder plays a fundamental role in developing the desired corporate identity and in creating a strong competitive advantage (Kiriakidou and Millward 2000; Kitchen *et al.* 2013). Today, the majority of companies believe that marketing and organisational communication are the most significant forms that contribute to corporate identity. With more and more research by both academics and practitioners alike, corporate identity is now widely recognised as an effective strategic instrument and a means to achieve competitive advantage (Melewar 2003; Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006; Stuart and Kerr 2010). Although a number of studies on corporate identity have been published, most are undertaken in the West (e.g., Melewar and Wooldridge 2001), and several authors have commented on the absence of research findings relevant to corporate identity in Asia, especially among emerging countries such as China's (Melewar and Jenkins 2002; Truong *et al.* 2010; Wong and Hogg 2008).

Researchers suggest that companies in Asia differ from their counterparts in the West in being more hierarchical (Li and Zhang 2011; Nguyen *et al.* 2014) and collective (Hofstede and Bond 1988; Wong and Ahuvia 1998), which may partially explain the different conceptualisation of corporate identity in these countries. Like their counterpart in developed economies, organisations in emerging countries have realised that a strong corporate identity with an aligned and consistent ethos across the marketplace can assist them in attracting investments, motivate employees and serve as a means to differentiate their products and services (Goodall *et al.* 2006; Melewar and Saunders 1999). Many organisations are thus striving to develop a distinct and recognisable identity. For example, certain characteristics of a corporate identity include a standing for high quality goods and services, a robust financial performance, a harmonious workplace environment, and a character of social and environmental responsibility (Einwiller and Will 2002; He and Mukherjee 2009).

In the present study, we aim to contribute with empirical data from China to further broaden our understanding of the corporate identity concept. Specifically, the paper adapts previous frameworks of corporate identity (e.g., Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006) and investigates what organisations perceive as the essential components of corporate identity concept including its dimensions and contents. It builds and updates on these past studies of corporate identity and further adds new dimensions on the basis of the industry practitioners' views. Based on qualitative in-depth interviews using the soft-laddering approach, and a multidisciplinary categorisation of analyses of corporate literature and web sites, a systematic analysis of the corporate identity was carried out. The study contributes to the marketing communications and management literatures in the following ways: (1) it extends existing corporate identity concepts in both the dimensionality and context with a comprehensive framework; (2) it provides new insights into corporate identity from the managerial perspective and generates implications for the management of brands in China; (3) it proposes a new definition of corporate identity for the current context.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: First, the literature review and theoretical framing of relevant and recent corporate identity literature is presented. A detailed method section follows, developed to answer the study's objectives comprehensively. Findings are subsequently analysed and critically discussed. Finally, implications for marketing communications and branding are proposed with sight on future research directions.

## **Literature review and theoretical framing**

Corporate identity is a strategic manifestation of both corporate-level vision and mission, and a strategy that an organisation employs in its operations or production (Melewar and Wooldridge 2001). Researchers argue that corporate identity is a strategic tool that requires

serious consideration due to the existence of different groups within the organisation (e.g., Pratt and Foreman 2000). That is, organisations can take on multiple identities, for instance, depending on different departments, such as marketing or finance, or in the case of a conglomerate, the industry sector in which a subsidiary company operates (Balmer and Greyser 2002). Effective management of corporate identity requires considering all projected identities, especially when forming operational positioning strategies (for more, see Simoes et al. (2005) for a good demonstration of the differences between the corporate identity and corporate identity management concepts).

A review of the extant literature, based on research by a number of influential commentators (Balmer and Soenen 1999; Ind 1992; Melewar and Jenkins 2002; Olins 1990), reveals several key findings on the concept, namely: (1) Academics and practitioners are placing increased importance on the issue of corporate identity. (2) Corporate identity is a multidisciplinary field, which requires the inclusion of different disciplines in order to capture its dimensions. Balmer and Soenen (1999) highlight that a multidisciplinary approach to the study of corporate identity is necessary, as there is no consensus on what elements make up the corporate identity mix (see also Bick *et al.* 2003). (3) It identifies the essence of what the firm is and incorporates many unique characteristics such as history, philosophy, culture, communication and the industry in which a firm operates. For example, a corporate identity may emphasise strongly on organisational aspects such as ethical and cultural values, organisational history and philosophy. (4) It is closely related to the organisation's corporate image, and a link between corporate identity and corporate image exists, in which image is the collective perception that the stakeholders have of corporate identity (Balmer 1998; Balmer and Soenen 1999; Ind 1992; Melewar and Jenkins 2002; Olins 1990).

Melewar and Jenkins (2002) note that the term 'corporate identity' evolved from marketing, in the areas of corporate visual identity systems (CVIS). CVIS compose of several

main elements such as the organisation's name, logo type/symbol, slogan, colour and typography, which are used to represent the organisational values and mission to the outside world (Dowling 1994; Melewar and Saunders 1998; Topalian 1984). Baker and Balmer (1997) state that visual identity has two fundamental purposes, firstly, it represents the organisation's values and philosophy, and secondly, it supports corporate communication. The organisation's visual identity, commonly associated with the visual design, can influence many of the stakeholders, including employees, investors and customers. It is the most frequently discussed aspect of corporate identity and as a consequence, visual identity and design remains the most commonly used methods to indicate a transition in identity such as a name change, often along with alterations to the corporate image (Dowling 1994; Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006).

As the corporate identity concept developed, the term became associated with a wide range of organisational functions including business strategy, philosophy of key executives, corporate culture, behaviour and corporate design (Siano et al. 2013; Van Riel 1997). Each of these aspects is both interdependent and unique to each organisation. For more about the details of the different disciplines and schools of thought, **and the strengths and weaknesses of extant corporate identity frameworks**, we refer to the key studies of Alessandri (2001), Kitchen *et al.* (2013), Melewar and Jenkins (2002), and Simoes, Dibb, and Fisk (2005). In examining corporate identity, this study identifies a gap in the study of corporate identity in emerging markets and transitional economies. **Due to different market characteristics, cultural and societal norms, it is not certain that corporate identity models in emerging countries reflect existing dimensions.** Thus, to fill this gap, the study recognises a need to ascertain what organisations in China believe are the core components of corporate identity, what they understand about structuring corporate identity, and to further investigate the relationship between the corporate identity dimensions.

## **Method**

### ***Data collection***

The study adopted a qualitative approach and the method of research was a case study. Using the soft-laddering technique, data were gathered through 24 in-depth interviews with managers from new high technology ventures in China. The soft-laddering technique is an interviewing technique where a response to a question is pushed by the interviewer in order to find subconscious motives (Reynolds and Olson 2001). The interviews did not follow any particular scheme or structure, but broad open-ended questions were oriented towards understanding corporate identity from a wide range of experiences and perspectives in order to provide an operational definition and to categorise dimensions (Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006). In accordance with previous studies, an analysis of corporate literature and web sites were further conducted to examine the companies' corporate identities. Based on a multidisciplinary categorisation, the study facilitated a systematic analysis of a wide range of components in order to reconstruct the associations with the corporate identity concept, here in the context of China.

The sampling frame comprised of principal founders, directors and senior managers in 12 high technology companies. Such key informants are accurate sources of data and should be approached where possible (Brush and Vanderwerf 1992). In the Chinese context, using these respondents is particularly appropriate due to the hierarchical nature and decision-making process in typical Chinese firms. To gain access to the firms, we approached the local municipal government and requested help in acquiring the addresses and phone numbers of the high technology companies in their region. We used this information to target specific technology ventures. In China, information about high-tech new venture firms is difficult to obtain, but despite this hurdle, we obtained our sampling frame, enabling us to further investigate our sample. In order to reduce the possibility of social desirability bias in our

research, we agreed not to reveal names of the executive directors and ensured confidentiality of their responses (Podsakoff *et al.* 2003).

The companies included in the study came from a broad spectrum of industries. As shown in Table 1, all the firms mainly operate in high technologies, with the electronics information sector accounting for the majority of the total sample; other industry coverage includes pharmaceutical and biotechnology sectors, energy and materials sector and integrated optical sector. Most of the firms had been in business for at least three years. The majority of the firms were small and medium-sized enterprises with between 20 and 200 employees and most of the firms were privately owned companies. We chose a broad cross-section of diverse companies because part of the investigation aimed to bring out and analyse varying aspects of corporate identity components. That is, whether the choice of certain components and identity were relevant to only some or all of the firms. The sample thus reflects a diverse set of organisations, functional areas, and positions in the high technology industries of China.

< Insert Table 1 About Here >

Of the 24 individuals interviewed, 8 were principal founders, 6 senior general managers or directors and 10 held managerial positions in the field of marketing. We achieved data saturation after conducting 24 in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted over a period of 6 weeks, in the late summer of 2014, each lasting about 45-60 minutes. As we targeted and approached the executives with our proposition to conduct our interviews, we noticed that there was great interest from these companies to learn more about the corporate identity concept; thus, we were able to interview a range of different companies, suitable for our study objectives. We coded and analysed the data from the interviews using NVivo 9.0. This enabled us to reflect on key themes and compare the data (Clisbee 2003). Using a



grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990), we incorporated a systematic and far-out comparison approach, which was subsequently followed by an integrated hierarchical coding to ensure that we had explored all the dimensions.

In addition to the interviews, we further conducted a broad spectrum of academic research on the topic of corporate identity. This included the use of secondary sources of information such as company literature, information from their respective websites and relevant press releases about each company.

## **Findings**

The current study identifies eight dimensions of corporate identity in the context of China's high technology industry. Figure 1 shows the study's framework, depicting the dimensions and sub-dimensions of corporate identity, which include: (1) Name (meaning, superstition), (2) Status (face, respect), (3) Culture (behaviour, mission/vision, values), (4) Self-Expression (beliefs, integrity, persona), (5) Affiliation/Network (guanxi), (6) Innovation (founder, government), (7) Strategy (management, leadership, structure), (8) Visual Design ('look', website). Each will be presented next.

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### ***(1) Name (Meaning, Superstition)***

There was a strong consensus amongst the interviewees that name was an important component of the overall corporate identity concept. An interviewee from the pharmaceutical company reflected this sentiment when asked about the importance of name to overall corporate identity:

“In China, the name of the company is the most important part of its identity. A name

has many meanings, both symbolic as literally. It has to have a deep meaning, perhaps signifying something strong and great”.

An interviewee from the energy and materials company stated that, especially in China, the inter-relationships of name and identity meant that the two concepts were inseparable:

“Our company name not only displays how our company is viewed by the outside world, but also to a large extent our identity. Our company name permeates every part of our organisation and reveals our identity to our shareholder, customers, our employees, and investors”.

According to the literature, a name is a word or a combination of words by which a person, place, or thing, a body or class, or any object of thought is designated, called, or known. Name is one of the most important components of individual’s self-identity and will also signal country of origin, ethnicity, and individual characteristics. Kasof (1993) explained, in the context of people, that name activates a rich set of semantic information including intellectual competence, race, and social class, which impact impression formation and evaluation. While there can be no doubt that names are of considerable importance to people, in that knowledge of a name can in many cases convey a good deal of information about the person possessing it (Hargreaves *et al.* 1983), in an organisational context, a name is mostly concerned with its brand, suggesting that it can be moulded to express a certain meaning.

Hargreaves *et al.* (1983) investigated the role of familiarity in the attractiveness of names. They found that liking of names is associated with familiarity, which supported the ‘mere exposure’ hypothesis. Among the context of people, common and frequent names receive higher, more positive evaluation than uncommon and infrequent names; individuals whose names are either extremely uncommon or extremely common in terms of the objective

frequency in the population are to be perceived least favourable, while those with names of intermediate frequency are more favourable (Hargreaves *et al.* 1983). Hence, there may be a curvilinear relationship between familiarity and liking, with names of intermediate familiarity being liked most. Using a similar line of reasoning, the study finds comparable expression of name and liking among the organisations and their corporate identity. This may partially explain why foreign companies entering China often translate their company names to the local language. It is apparent that favourable names are important for several reasons, for example, to stand out yet not to appear dislikeable. Of great importance is to include the meaning of a specific name with its associations in the identity of the company. For example, several managers noted similar sentiments, with one respondent noting that:

“The name in Chinese culture has long history of having great meanings. Ideally, it has to reveal something with good luck and prosperity. If a name is associated with something bad, that company is almost certain not to be chosen for business”.

## **(2) Status (*Face, Respect*)**

The majority of interviewees also perceived the matter of status as being highly important to corporate identity. The immense interest in the academic literature on the subject confirms our finding. A manager from a biotechnology firm expressed the importance that his organisation placed on status:

“What is identity without status? In China, status is everything, from consumer products, to education, to the company you work for. Status is integral to any identity that you can mention, including our company. With status, people aspire to work for us”.

According to the literatures on cultural management, it is imperative that managers

understand the underlying cultural behaviour, including collectivistic behaviour concerned with face and status. The differences between Eastern and Western cultures are well supported. According to Markus and Kitayama (1991), Western cultures tend to define the self in terms of individual autonomy, suggesting that individuals are independent of one another. This is a contrast to Eastern cultures, which tend to define the self in terms of social connectedness, signifying a greater sensitivity to the relationship context. For example, in Western culture, friends, co-workers, managers, business owners and so on are treated on an equal basis, compared to the East, which is more prone to a hierarchical structure (Hofstede 1980) and more sensitive to group membership (Hui *et al.* 1991). While this relates to the individual persona, our findings reveal that similar thoughts pertaining to the corporate identity, with comments such as, “the identity of the people (working for the organisation) is the identity of the firm”. The status-dimension of corporate identity may overlap with, or is somewhat similar, to the ‘good employer’-dimension of Walsh and Beatty’s (2007) corporate reputation conceptualisation. This is interesting in itself, as it reveals something about the level of understanding among the executives in China, referring to similarity and overlap between corporate identity and corporate reputation. Further investigation is needed to uncover the differences and similarities.

Researchers propose that the cultural distinction between individualism versus collectivism also differ in the sensitivity to the concept of ‘face’, which was first introduced and discussed academically by Goffman (1955). Brown and Levinson (1987, 1978) proposed a distinction between positive and negative face, whereby a positive face value represents others’ consideration and approval of an individual’s demands. Broadly speaking, face values reflect individuals’ social self-esteem and the desire to be respected in social contexts (Ting-Toomey and Kurogi 1998). Such concerns indicate that many people pay more attention to their social needs rather than their personal needs (Wong and Ahuvia 1998). In organisations,

such considerations towards the desire to be respected among stakeholders also holds true.

For example:

“When you present yourself as part of our company, you will not do anything to harm our reputation or anything that ruins the face of the company”.

In China, people have stronger face consciousness and are more likely to attach importance to the extrinsic attributes (e.g. brand and logo) than intrinsic attributes (e.g. service) of products in order to demonstrate their status, esteem and self-image (Belk 1988; Belk and Pollay 1985). Some studies have examined the influence of face in the behaviour of Chinese: *Mianzi* is a principal characteristic of the Chinese persona (Lu 1934), which directly links with social status and the demonstration of one's wealth (Yang 1994). Such persona is often concerned with gaining and saving face, or avoiding losing face, when they make contact with others (Hwang 1987). More importantly, face can represent the esteemed status of self (Yang 1994; Zhai 2005), the importance of face value between individuals and societies (Li and Su 2007; Zhou and Belk 2004; Zhou and Nakamoto 2000), the association with relatives, friends and even colleagues (Kashima *et al.* 1995), and the concept of social self (Hwang 1987). These facts can be identified and described in most Chinese-oriented countries. Other scholars have indicated that in order to obtain and preserve face, people are willing to pay more for brand names (Li and Su 2007) and that these individuals believe that a name-brand product, or a brand name with high social recognition and a high price tag, will enhance their social status and position (Tse 1996). A principal founder commented:

“We aim to build relationships with foreign, reputable companies to achieve greater face and respect among the local suppliers. That is our advantage, which we can do, because of our known identity”.

“Face is complicated in China. It is both who we are and what arises or comes out from it”.

Ho (1976) suggests that a loss of face is associated with a loss in status, and similarly, a gain of face is a gain in status. Indeed, the concept of face is inextricably linked to status earned in a social network (Chang and Holt 1994). Previous studies suggest that collectivist cultures are more concerned with face (e.g. Oetzel and Ting-Toomey 2003) due to the heavily influenced Chinese ancestry and language. Collectivist cultures typically score higher on measures of face concern (Zane and Yeh 2002) and face consciousness (Bao *et al.* 2003). This is especially evident in interpersonal conflict settings where the Chinese have greater concern for face than those in the West (Oetzel and Ting-Toomey 2003). Such concerns were clearly evidenced during the interviews, reflected in the corporate identity context. We note that the face-dimension may contain certain aspects of the employee identification dimension of Kitchen *et al.* (2013), which is underpinned by social identity theory, however, we consider the face-dimension more holistically and different, because face has something to do with ‘gaining respect from the outside’ (Ho 1976). Although face is receiving greater attention in cross-cultural research (Li and Su 2007), research is limited in understanding the role of face and status with regard to corporate identity. Thus, while our study support aspects of traditional research concerning face, it adds new contextual evidence as part of the corporate identity dimension.

### ***(3) Organisation Culture (Behaviour, Mission & Vision, Values)***

Scholars suggest that there is a plethora of different views as to what constitutes corporate culture and how it links with corporate identity. While some argue that it is strongly associated with routines, others argue that employees and their shared values are central to

culture (Peter and Waterman 1982). Researchers suggest that there are differing views concerning the relationship between corporate culture and corporate identity. On the one hand, Schein (1985) suggests that culture characterises the consensus within a company about how activities should be accomplished and is conceived as a result of a group's shared experience and learning with respect to matters of external adaptation and internal integration. On the other hand, Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006) suggest that in contrast to culture, identity pertains to who we are as an organisation. Moingeon (1999) states that the use of the identity concept is a result of field researchers' perceptions of the inadequacy of the culture concept to go past the descriptive level in organisational analysis. Downey (1986) believes that corporate culture is the consequence of corporate identity and argues that culture is the 'what' of a company and identity is the 'why'.

In the present study, there was agreement amongst the interviewees that the corporate culture at their organisation was fundamental to its commercial success and thus, part of their identity. Most of the interviewees were able to define the characteristics of their specific corporate culture, for example, some interviewees from an electronics company stated that the culture represented:

"Rules, discipline, group work, and management".

"What we do in terms of our routines – that's our organisation culture. But it can also be something like, what are the values of the company, what are the elements that makes who we are and why we are here, for instance, team work or purpose".

There was some debate amongst the interviewees over the relationship between corporate culture and corporate identity, and about which came before the other. The majority of interviewees perceived the two concepts were linked, that is, culture leading to identity, suggesting that both were being seen as separate and distinct entities, yet complex interlinks

existed between the two concepts. For example, an interviewee from the engineering company stated that:

“I think corporate identity is influenced by the behaviour of the managers, which in turn, are those who develop the organisation culture. This culture thus forms an important part of the corporate identity, which is displayed and projected to external stakeholders”.

This view seems to perceive corporate identity as being an image developed by the organisation for marketing purposes to outside stakeholders and not intrinsically linked to internal aspects of the firm. Thus, corporate culture is perceived as being an entirely separate entity from corporate identity, yet interlinking and influencing it. A respondent stated that his company would try to project a different corporate identity depending on the groups they intended to appeal to and was thus more flexible in contrast to a culture, which existed purely in the minds of employees. It was suggested that corporate culture is what happens inside the organisations, that is, how employees feel about working for the firm, while corporate identity is outward oriented, that is, how the firm wants to be seen by various stakeholder groups. However, many interviewees suggested that corporate culture and corporate identity were inseparably connected. For example, one respondent from a consulting company noted that:

“Corporate culture and corporate identity are certainly connected and one cannot exist without the other. It is similar to one’s behaviour and one’s identity”.

Some of the interviewees went as far as to suggest culture as being exactly the same thing as identity. Others expressed the opinion that culture was simply a component of identity, while some felt that culture transcended identity and was a far broader concept than identity itself.



Hence, the views were wide-ranging and interesting, but the majority of the interviewees felt that a strong culture was fundamental to the success of their organisations and that corporate culture is what would eventually lead to the corporate identity. Thus, the present study adds clear empirical evidence to this discussion from the high technology sector in China.

In order to allow a systematic and objective evaluation of the concept of corporate culture, the study analysed various sub-components. In spite of no universally accepted definition of corporate culture, a review of the literature suggested that several important elements make up culture, namely, philosophy, mission, values, principles, guidelines, history, national culture, the founder of the company and subculture (Ambler and Barrow 1996; Czarniawska and Wolff 1998; Schmidt 1995).

The present study acknowledged a dynamic inter-relationship between culture and behaviour arising from values (mission and vision). According to Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006) corporate cultures are generally communicated to stakeholders in some form, particularly through managerial behaviour, often with the intention of gaining employee commitment via core corporate values. In the interviews, all respondents believed that managers' behaviour was a fundamental influence on the corporate identity at their company. Many interviewees noted that communication could only be effective if performance objectives had a clear vision and mission supporting it. Management communication is perceived by many academics and practitioners as being the most important type of communication, as it involves the expression of organisational goals directly to internal stakeholders (Kennedy 1997; Kiriakidou and Millward 2000). Most of the interviewees concurred with this view, for example, an interviewee from an energy and materials company stated:

“In China, there is a very hierarchical organisation culture. The leader's behaviour greatly influences other employees' view towards the organisation”.

“Often, emails are sent around by the administration to emphasise correct behaviour. A form of teaching, if you like”.

Overall, the values are found to be an important indicator of organisation culture. This is consistent with previous literature and the same is thus evidenced in China.

#### ***(4) Self-Expression (Beliefs, Integrity, Persona)***

The way in which an organisation expresses itself towards stakeholders relates to beliefs, which in turn are influenced by the corporate philosophy created by senior management. According to Van Riel and Balmer (1997) values influence the beliefs within the organisation and include language, rituals and ideologies that guide the company’s culture and form the corporate identity. All of the interviewed companies had a clear set of explicit statements pertaining to corporate philosophies and goals, as evidenced both from the interviews and their websites.

Most of the interviewees stated that their organisations had ideologies that were in place to clarify organisational ethics, integrity and objectives to a wide variety of stakeholder groups. This is not uncommon in China, where such philosophies deeply permeate all aspects of an organisation. Abratt (1989) notes that the corporate mission pertains to the reason for the existence of the company and is thus seen by many as the most important element of corporate philosophy. An interviewee from a biotech company maintained the need for a mission statement as utmost importance for his organisation:

“We strongly believe in our mission – to improve human lives. Without it, how could we exist?”

Many interviewees stated that firms often express their identity via their company’s mission

statement. This expression in turn, would project their corporate philosophy, beliefs, principles and guidelines, often embedded in such types of official statements. Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006) note that corporate principles are an important influence on essential corporate actions such as targets, values and the mission of an organisation, whereas corporate guidelines are vital in explaining the significance of corporate principles to all levels of the hierarchy within the organisation.

A clear link was found between beliefs held by the company's employees and corporate identity, especially because such beliefs are trained throughout their careers. Managerial 'lectures' are not uncommon in China, fostering both a sense of community and collectivism, as well as addressing the roles of integrity, responsibility and ethics. These form, in part, of the overall identity and personification of the company.

Moingeon and Ramanantsoa (1997) state that history is instrumental in defining the corporate identity and further, that identity in itself in turn also is instrumental in guiding history by its contribution to the development of cultural norms expressed in employees' perceptions and actions, thus a dynamic linkage is evident between these two elements. In China, the militant approach to management often influences the way in which organisations are managed and subsequently, form an important aspect of its self-expression and corporate identity. Most of the interviewees were of the opinion that Chinese military and communist history was significant constituents of the corporate identity concept. One interviewee from a service company stated that corporate identity was influenced by a sense of 'order' and 'control':

"Our organisation is run strictly based on military discipline and principles. That ensures that there is order and control over the management, roles, and responsibilities of each employee. You could say that is our corporate identity. However, this is also the culture of China".

This is evidenced in the fact that stakeholders' perceptions of organisations are formed from organisational activities such as behaviour, beliefs around integrity, which are the key to the foundations of identity. The majority of respondents believed corporate identity to be an important element to company personification, which was "similar to people, typically was influenced by history". This link of history and identity was particularly clear and strongly related to the founder of the company. For example, one employee mentions that, "the founder's beliefs are my beliefs". In an example about the founder's beliefs about signing contracts, his own perspectives were influenced:

"In China, a contract is vague and will not specify all terms clearly to the letter like in Western countries. This is called flexibility and common when conducting business in China. The contract is the contract, however, how it is implemented, that depends on the people. This is why you must know people to get things done".

#### ***(5) Affiliation/Network (Guanxi)***

A sense of belonging is of utmost importance to define a corporate identity. In China, the network and affiliation to a group is an important aspect of corporate identity. Many commentators suggest that the network of a corporation is a fundamental element of its identity (Albert and Whetten 1985; Hatch and Schultz 1997; Kiriakidou and Millward 2000; Topalian 1984). That is, what are the ties that the company has with other organisations, including government, universities, or foreign multinationals. Such relations define the corporate identity.

The majority of the interviewees believe that having strong networks can have a very long-term effect on the overall corporate identity of organisations. It was unanimously agreed that when presented with strong partner firms as supporters, investors, distributors, or customers, this could have a huge impact on corporate identity. This is unsurprising as the

“guanxi” is clearly important in China and linked to perceptions about the affiliation and sense of belonging towards a group.

Most interviewees believed that to get things done the way one wishes, there is a need for a network of people to support. This is especially important when it was the government, as it opened up for more support, and more doors would remain open. As expressed by one of the technology directors:

“Our organisation not only has strong links to the best universities in China, but also links with the party (China’s communist party)”.

“An important part of business in China involves the use of favours. It is impossible to get anything done by yourself. You need someone; someone who can help you and with his help, you owe him a favour, which you need to return in the future. It's how it works”.

Finally, respondents were asked how important networks were in influencing corporate identity. Most respondents stated that networks or guanxi influence customers and other stakeholders and is an important part to conducting business in China. Employees’ networking remains an important part of their job and the corporate identity enables these employees to be successful at that. Thus networking is generally seen as a vital component of identity. Other interviewees corroborated this view, for example, an interviewee from a service firm stated that the behaviour of senior management had a significant impact on other employees:

“Who they (senior management) associate themselves with, gives them more power and more intimidation. If they know some top guys, you have to be very careful with your approach in dealing with them”.

Consequently, the majority of interviewees believe that affiliation and network are integral to identity. Corporate identity is unsurprising as ultimately what organisations ‘do’ and ‘who they are seen with’ will play a big part in shaping perceptions of what they ‘are’.

#### ***(6) Innovation (Founder, Government)***

In general, every interviewee believed that the company founder had a great influence on corporate culture and especially the innovation of the company. In China’s high tech industry, companies are characterised by constrained resources (Yu *et al.* 2014) and often, these are reliant on the founder’s as an essential knowledge factor in the innovation process (Tang 2010). Thus, to compensate for deficiencies in the physical capital (Kato, Okamuro, and Honjo 2014) and weak institutional support (Peng and Heath 1996; Tang 2010), firms rely on the founder’s knowledge and this reliance is not surprising due to both the industry characteristics and hierarchical nature of organisations in China. Many interviewees were adamant about the role of innovation in the companies in China.

“In China today, innovation is everything. We are innovating, moving away from being the factory of the world to the innovation centre of the world. Look at all the new high tech firms. They are innovating more than ever, doing different things. That is now their identity and the most important aspect to competitive advantage”.

“Innovation is different in China. For example, when looking for a parking spot, Chinese will sometimes park illegally and pay for the fine (for exceeding the time limit), because the cost of that fine might still be cheaper than paying a full ticket somewhere else. That is the innovation mind-set”.

The founders’ influence on employees’ beliefs remains an important source of knowledge. Every single interviewee knew about his or her company’s founder and many suggested that

the founder's creativity usually played a role in the development of the corporate identity. An interviewee from an engineering company, when asked if he felt that the founder of the company had a significant impact on corporate identity, reflected this view:

“The founders had a big influence on the company because they brought the management cultures to the organisation. We all know his past achievements and respect that”.

The following statement in particular shows the obvious links between the founder and other components of corporate identity such as the company goals. The respondent from a firm stated that:

“His goals are clear. To become the top innovation company of the year. If they can do it, we can do it better”.

Many scholars maintain that a strong link exists between the national culture from which the company originated and its corporate identity (Foo and Lowe 1999; Rowlinson and Procter 1999; Varey and Lewis 2000). For example, common associations are made such as ‘German efficiency’ and ‘Japanese innovation’ (Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006). In general, the interviewees strongly believed that there was a country-of-origin (COO) effect present within their organisation, suggesting a move from ‘industrious’ to ‘innovativeness’ of China. This influence was heavily guided by the government. The COO effect appeared stronger in organisations that were focused on the domestic market, than those that had grown larger and targeted international markets. One interviewee from an information firm was most adamant about the importance of national culture on its overall corporate identity. In China, such national culture clearly permeate the company:

“The government recently announced a plan to make China the innovation centre of

the world, such as The 11th Five-Year Program (2006-2010), which highlights an “innovation-oriented nation” and includes “endogenous innovation” strategies as a foundation for a sustainable national competitive advantage. We have clearly felt this. We now feel that this is our purpose and identity”.

Respondents believed that national culture impact had a significant influence on corporate culture, however, many were of the opinion that the influence of national culture declined as the company started exporting to overseas markets. This sentiment was strongly expressed by respondents from a satellite company. Such companies are described by Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006) as ‘in transition’ to becoming true multinationals – one from which transcends the COO effect as its operations take place in different countries and as it starts to adapt its activities to conditions in these overseas countries. An interesting finding thus reveals that the role of innovation plays increasing importance in China, as part of corporate identity, yet as the organisation grows further through mergers and acquisitions, the innovation arising from national culture decreases in importance to corporate identity. It may suggest that the without the influence, control and support of the government, these firms may not be as innovative, however, more research is needed to test this assertion.

#### ***(7) Strategy (Management, Leadership, Structure)***

The firm’s corporate strategy includes the fundamental objectives and strategies for competing, thus it establishes the products and services, the targeted profit levels and the stakeholders to partner with. Many researchers suggest a strong link between corporate strategy and corporate identity. Gray and Balmer (1998) suggest that the major components of corporate identity include the company’s strategy, philosophy, culture and organisational design. For example, Simpson (1988) suggests a strong link between corporate identity and



differentiation strategy, stating that differentiation takes advantage of a firm's strengths that are important constituents of its basic identity. Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006) note that a positioning strategy is associated with the identity in that it reveals what a company is striving for and how it would like to be distinguished from competitors, typically achieved with an analysis of their inherent strengths and weaknesses.

As substantiated by many interviewees, corporate strategy is instrumental in attempts at creating corporate identity. Another point is that corporate strategy has a great impact on identity, particularly when it comes to competing with foreign companies and multinationals. A respondent from the high tech firm stated that:

“Where are we going? How can we achieve competitive advantage? What can we do to compete with foreign companies? What does it take for us to get where we want to be? These are the questions of strategy, and more importantly, of who we are – our identity”.

An interviewee from the energy company mentioned about how corporate identity provides direction and purpose for his company and is therefore intrinsically linked to strategy:

“As a person, I have a plan about my career. This is the same for our company. It has a plan for the future. Without planning, there is no future”.

Thus, strategy can be considered as a subset of corporate identity in this situation because it provides the means by which identity is permeated throughout the company. There was also agreement concerning the importance of the relationship of strategy and leadership with identity. The findings clearly suggest that lower level employees saw senior management as role models and that management leadership style was fundamental in setting standards for employee behaviour. This leadership was the identity of the organisation. For example:

“What is identity? Simply put, it is the leadership style”.

“In China, organisations are very performance based. If you cannot perform, you will be replaced. The leaders will ensure that. It is normal to reward employees when they do well, and punish them, if they do not. This style has become our identity”.

Scholars suggest that corporate structure, consisting of organisational structure and branding structure, is a fundamental component of corporate identity (Chajet 1989; Ind 1992; Olins 1986; Strong 1990). Brand structure is when products and services are differentiated through different brand names and when brands play a fundamental role in establishing an identity in the marketplace and strengthening customer loyalty (Douglas 2001). For example, as mentioned by all of the interviewees in one form or the other:

“Our brand is our identity and how we differentiate ourselves from the competition”.

Thus, the interviewees’ understanding of the corporate identity concept is greatly influenced by the differentiation aspect. In addition, there is also evidence to suggest the importance of images and visuals, that is, when the organisation uses a consistent name and visual style. This latter point is discussed in the final dimension.

#### ***(8) Visual Design (‘Look’, Website)***

Corporate design describes the visual cues that are associated with a specific organisation and can be conveyed in other ways, for example, through the companies’ products and vehicles and the location as well as the architecture of its buildings. For example, Olins (1990) highlights the importance of the organisational environment in expressing the corporate identity, suggesting that the interior office design may symbolise many aspects of the corporate culture and identity. Dowling (1994) also highlights other applications of visual

design systems including advertising, clothing, packaging and promotion and give-aways.

The investigation of both the online website research and the interviews supported the assertion that many organisations use visual design as a means of expressing their strengths and qualities of their organisation. One interviewee from a biotechnology company reflected the general consensus that design was a crucial element of corporate identity:

“In China, the design is what we refer to the ‘outside’ or ‘the look’. From the outside, everything has to look perfect. That is our visual design, which conveys this, and this is also our corporate identity”.

Although there was considerable agreement that corporate design was an important part of the overall corporate identity concept, the interviews found that some sub-components of design were considered more important. Numerous interviewees believed that the website was an important aspect of design, stating that websites can have a powerful effect on stakeholders’ perceptions of the organisation and can be useful in reminding employees of the corporate mission. The interviewee from an information company emphasised that:

“Our identity is simply found online, via our website”.

“Nowadays, the websites tells much about what we do as a company, how we strive to change the world, etc., or in other words, our corporate identity is online”.

Again, the relationship between visual design and organisational culture is apparent, with comments such as “...Baidu (Chinese search engine) has a particular design and architecture which also influences their culture – we are no different...”. This is consistent with Melewar and Karaosmanoglu’s (2006) study, which found that corporate slogan and mission are often cited as key components of culture as well as design. Among the interviewees, there was also a strong consensus about visual design, particularly that architecture and location are an

important aspect of corporate visual identity. An interviewee from a high tech consulting company suggested that a particular change in office location and layout had a profound effect on the firm's internal culture:

“Where you live, where your company is situated, which city you are located in – all of that is important to our identity. That is what we mean by the outside look. I prefer to say that I work in a beautiful skyscraper in the downtown of Pudong (Shanghai) rather than some place in the countryside”.

Thus, to summarise, the majority of interviewees believed that design was an important aspect of corporate identity. However, they also felt that some of the sub-elements of design were more important. The ‘outside look’, such as favourable location, office building and its layout, were of particular importance whilst there was some scepticism surrounding the effects of logo changes. Of great importance was the design of the company's web site. Web sites provides that stakeholders with information about the company and thus are important in shaping perceptions of corporate identity.

### **Summary and conclusion**

Different from prior studies, the current study identifies eight dimensions of corporate identity in the context of China's high technology industry. These dimensions differ from existing findings in the Western context. For example, Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006) found seven dimensions, namely, corporate communication, corporate design, corporate culture, behaviour, corporate structure, industry identity and corporate strategy. Ind (1992) placed greater emphasis on ethical and cultural values. Balmer (1998) identifies unique characteristics of the firm such as history, philosophy, culture, communication and the industry the firm operates in. Finally, Van Riel (1997) suggests a wide range of functions as

part of corporate identity including business strategy, philosophy of key executives, corporate culture, behaviour and corporate design unique to each organisation. Hence, the context of China has shown to influence different focus, more significantly around the 'impression' that corporate identity can contribute with commercially, here by the senior executives, interviewed for the present study. We suggest that the focus on the external/visual aspects of corporate identity reveals that some high-tech firms in China may not have enough experience and capacity to engage in more holistic corporate identity concept provided. The lack of such experience is particularly likely for new firms, which are still in their early stage of development (Jones and Coviello 2005). For example, firms with unsystematic branding efforts may focus on the marketing procedures for sales purposes rather than on developing a complete branding strategy that incorporates corporate identity. Thus, based on the extensive discussion and from the preceding analysis, the following definition and the revised dimensions of corporate identity are proposed:

Corporate identity is the display and 'the look' of an organisation among stakeholders. It is intrinsically related to the overall corporate impression, making an organisation unique and incorporates the organisation's name, status, organisation culture, self-expression, affiliation/network, innovation, strategy, and visual design.

The responses reveal that the high-tech companies utilise the corporate identity concept more from a 'face' and 'the look'-perspective, focusing on visual design and driven by status concerns and self-expression, when comes to identity. Therefore, the definition above is generated within the realm of cross-cultural management theory, which also enables us to achieve our objective of providing an operational definition of corporate identity in the context of emerging markets, such as China (Cornelissen and Elving 2003). The definition explores key elements of corporate identity, namely, pertaining to symbolism, behaviour and

marketing communication (Van Riel 1995), and provides measurable terms by incorporating the following corporate identity aspects: name, status, organisation culture, self-expression, affiliation/network, innovation, strategy, and visual design. Such measurement-enabled dimensions will assist in the operationalisation of corporate identity, and aid academics and practitioners with further empirical research (Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006). In conclusion, the evidence from the interviews shows that corporate identity is a more complex issue than being a straightforward phenomenon (Cornelissen and Elving 2003). With the dimensions proposed in the study and corresponding definition as well as the contingencies relevant to them, a starting point is provided for a more effective corporate identity management system for positioning and customisation of identity towards different stakeholders.

The multi-disciplinary and across-sectorial approach adopted for the present study further adds to the extant literature by documenting the effect of corporate identity on the audience in China, broadening the scope of the brand identity literature to an emerging market context. That is, by identifying the corporate identity construct directly from the executives' perspective rather than relying on data from subordinates, this research adds insight for corporate identity research in China.

### **Managerial implications**

In China, the external impression means everything. Thus, corporate identity is of tremendous importance and should never be taken lightly. Senior executives and management can use the corporate identity framework – re-categorised to suit the context of China - to discuss their starting point for the development of corporate identity management strategies. This conceptualisation of corporate identity dimensions in practice will help managers define corporate identity concept in measurable terms and may assist efforts to

achieve sustainable competitive advantage in China. Implications exist for design research in terms of the relationship between corporate identity and design (visual) approaches.

The study suggests that there are considerable benefits to be gained from developing and focusing more on corporate identity in China more strategically. A good identity will bring many benefits including the motivation of employees, improving customer loyalty and increased investment into a company. With the developed definition of corporate identity, insight exists as the revised corporate identity categorisations, which assists in further focus, emphasis and measurement. Such categorisation of corporate identity dimensions provides management a framework to formulate an appropriate corporate identity strategy for their organisation. Furthermore, this framework enables a useful starting point for companies to conduct further research that may support them in identifying which specific corporate identity components that they should focus on and which ones stakeholders find most important. Companies can then use this information to manage their corporate identity more systematically and display the desired, customised identity to the different groups of stakeholders.

### **Limitations and further research directions**

We acknowledge some limitations, which provide fruitful directions for future research. First, the study's findings revealed that many executives confessed to having paid little attention to corporate identity in the past, including on how to manage, control or even explicitly define the concept of corporate identity. All had ideas about what it was, but the corporate identity concept had not yet been considered systematically or strategically. This is consistent with Melewar *et al.*'s (2003) study, in which it is suggest that there is a considerable divergence in opinions concerning the fundamental components of corporate identity among practitioners. Most interviewees heavily associated corporate identity with the areas of branding related to

name, website design, logo, and aspects of marketing communication. There was little agreement as to whether or not organisational behaviour and leadership were determinants of corporate identity. Future studies could create a follow-up study in China and reveal how the corporate identity concept is practiced over time in a longitudinal study.

Second, the study focuses on high-tech industries and relatively new enterprises; thus, the findings may not be generalisable to other contexts. Future studies should test and validate our framework in both other industrial settings as well as with the adoption of different types of research approaches, such as a quantitative study. Third, interviews were conducted solely from the top management point of view and future studies should include both the views of other stakeholders, both internal and external to the organisations, as well as to consider conducting a longitudinal study in order to provide insight into the way in which corporate identity may change over time and among other groups. Fourth, the existence of sub-cultures provides a useful reminder that organisations are made up of many heterogeneous social groups and should be considered when interpreting the results. Hence, future studies are encouraged to confirm both the dimensions and sub-dimensions in a comprehensive quantitative study in a multi-level study to provide a broader framework of corporate identity and visual design. Overall, more research is needed to uncover corporate identity and corporate identity management in the Asian region in order to advance marketing communications, frameworks and theoretical models alike.



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**Table 1 Sample Profile****Sample profile (N=24)**

	N		N
<b><i>Industry type</i></b>		<b><i>Age of firm</i></b>	
Electronic information	11	0 to 2 years	10
Energy and materials	2	3 to 5 years	8
Pharmaceutical and biotechnology	2	6 to 8 years	6
Integrated optical	5		
Others (e.g., scientific instruments and aerospace)	2		
<b><i>Number of employees</i></b>		<b><i>Ownership</i></b>	
Less than 20	7	State/collectively owned	3
20 to 50	10	Joint share	3
51 to 200	3	Privately owned	14
Over 200	4	Foreign invested company	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>		<b>24</b>

**Figure 1 Framework of corporate identity in an emerging market**

